
Choosing Words Carefully: Language to Help Fight Islamic Terrorism

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Editorial Abstract: *The authors examine how frequent misuse of Arabic expressions, especially in western popular media, may help promote rather than counter radical Islam's ideologies. They recommend alternate expressions for many of the pertinent concepts and entities in the current war on terrorism, to better define both intent and meaning.*

The United States must do more to communicate its message. Reflecting on Bin Ladin's success in reaching Muslim audiences, Richard Holbrooke wondered, "How can a man in a cave out communicate the world's leading communications society?"

Use Precise Terms Precisely

The answer to Mr. Holbrooke's question is an unsophisticated one: Bin Ladin speaks in a language that his Muslim listeners understand. We, on the other hand, simply do not comprehend the meaning of many words that we use to describe the enemy. American leaders misuse language to such a degree that they unintentionally wind up promoting the ideology of the groups the United States is fighting. We cannot win widespread support throughout the Muslim world if we use terms that, to them, define the behavior of our enemies as moral. Because the Global War on Terrorism—or more precisely the war against Islamic totalitarian terrorism—includes a war of ideas, leaders, journalists, authors and speakers must use the most accurate terms to describe those ideas.

The responsibility for precision in expression rests with anyone who believes in the need to share information candidly. But for those unfamiliar with Islamic doctrine, history and tradition, it may often be necessary to rely on scholars or other experts about the Islamic world to provide one with the necessary guidance to help convey the message correctly. Muslims will ultimately

determine whether the ideology of al-Qa'ida, its affiliates, franchisees and fellow travelers represents authentic Islam or not, but the West can have enormous influence on their decisions.

Furthermore, it is important to make sure that the civilian community in the United States and that of our allies and coalition partners accurately understands the nature of the enemy that we are fighting. Unfortunately, Western governments, intellectuals and journalists commonly use words that inadvertently (or sometimes deliberately) authenticate the doctrines of our enemy as truly Islamic. Correcting this vocabulary is a necessary step to educate the wide-ranging groups who are affected by the war; to discredit those who either passively or actively, or wittingly or unwittingly support Islamic totalitarian terrorism; and to reveal the truly insidious nature of our enemy.

What Are We Really Saying?

This essay discusses the most egregious and dangerous misuses of language regarding Islamic totalitarian terrorists; a comprehensive study would



*Which word choices will play well on the street?
(Defense Link)*

require a book. We begin with the word jihad, which literally means striving and generally occurs as part of the expression "jihad fi sabil illah," meaning "striving in the path of God." Striving in the path of God is a duty of all Muslims. Calling our enemies jihadis and their movement a global jihad thus indicates that we recognize their doctrines and actions as being in the path of God and, for Muslims, legitimate. In short, we explicitly designate ourselves as the enemies of Islam.

Muslims have debated the meaning and application of the concept of jihad for centuries. Our application of the term to the actions of our enemies puts us on their side of the debate. We need not concern ourselves with the identification of the original or legally correct meaning of the term; individual Muslims will make up their own minds. As we have previously written, “Classical texts speak only to, not for, contemporary Muslims.” It is also important to note that opposing jihad, a basic principle of Islam, violates a classical text of our own. The United States Constitution denies our government the ability to prohibit the free exercise of religion; consequently, we should never use a term, such as jihad, that misstates our current and historical position on religion.

Mujahid (plural mujahidin or mujahideen): one who participates in jihad, and frequently translated in the American media as “holy warrior.” The use of this term designates the activity of the enemy as jihad and thus legitimizes it. It was quite proper for us to describe the warriors who resisted the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as mujahidin, many of whom are now our allies in Afghanistan. To extend the term to our current enemies dishonors our allies as well as authenticates our opponents as warriors for Islam. Even to a Western audience it can lend a sense of nobility to an otherwise ignoble enemy.

Caliphate (khlilafa): This term literally means successor and came to refer to the successors of the Prophet Muhammad as the political leaders of the Muslim community. Sunni Muslims traditionally regard the era of the first four caliphs (632-661) as an era of just rule. Accepting our enemies’ description of their goal as the restoration of a historical caliphate again validates an aspect of their ideology. Al-Qa’ida’s caliphate would not mean the re-establishment of any historical regime; it would be a global totalitarian state. Anyone who needs a preview of how such a state would act merely has to review the conduct of the Taliban in Afghanistan before September 11, 2001.



*Moderate Muslim clerics address a multimedia audience.
(Defense Link)*

Allah: the word Allah in Arabic means the God, nothing more, nothing less. It is not specifically Muslim; Arabic speaking Christians and Jews also use it. In English, Allah should be translated as God, not transliterated. While translation emphasizes the common heritage of Judaism, Christianity and Islam (the three faiths which identify their God as the God of Abraham) it does not imply that the Abrahamic faiths share identical concepts of God. Even though some Muslims use Allah rather than God in English, the practice exaggerates the divisions among Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

What Are the Right Words for the Job?

Now that a few unsuitable word choices have been addressed, it is time to begin to identify the proper expressions to use whenever discussing the global Islamic totalitarian terrorist movement. Many of these terms will be unfamiliar to Westerners, but not to most Muslim audiences. Only those who actively, passively or even unwittingly support al-Qa’ida’s (and similar groups) professed goals would find the terms, and their use by non-Muslims, offensive.

To refute challenges to the new context surrounding these expressions, any user of these terms must be able to define the words in order to defend their

accuracy and the appropriateness of their use. Otherwise anyone who dares to define the enemy using its own Islamic language can be challenged by a variety of “pundits” who still see the struggle in terms of religion or poverty rather than political ideology; who despise Western society, capitalism or democracy; or who oppose the war for any other reason.

Hirabah: this word, which is derived from the Arabic root which refers to war or combat, means sinful warfare—warfare contrary to Islamic law. There is ample legal justification for applying this term to Islamic totalitarian terrorists and no moral ambiguity in its connotation. We should describe the Islamic totalitarian movement as the global hirabah, not the global jihad.

Mufsid (moofsid): this word refers to an evil or corrupt person; the plural is mufsidun. We call our enemies mufsidun, not jihadis, for two reasons. Again, there is no moral ambiguity and the specific denotation of corruption carries enormous weight in most of the Islamic world.

Fitna/fatin: fitna literally means temptation or trial, but has come to refer to discord and strife among Muslims; a fatin is a tempter or subversive. Applying these terms to our enemies and their works condemns their current activities as divisive and harmful. It also identifies them with movements and individuals in Islamic history with

negative reputations such as the assassins of the Caliph `Uthman in 656, who created the first fissure in the political unity of the Muslim community

Totalitarian: calling our enemies totalitarian serves several purposes. There is no such thing as a benign totalitarianism. Totalitarianism is a Western invention and it appeared in the Islamic world as a result of Western influence (first fascist, then Marxist-Leninist). It is also in direct contrast to the idea that the enemy would actually establish a caliphate if they defeat the United States, our allies and coalition partners.


Not the Last Word, Just the Beginning

This essay is neither definitive nor complete. It is only the beginning of

a “primer” of the terminology used to describe Islamic totalitarian movements. There should be far more discussion about the right words to use to describe the variety of threats posed by transnational terrorists—Islamic groups and others. This article, we hope will help jump-start the discourse.

Notwithstanding the fact that this article is a small beginning, the terms proposed herein should become an indispensable part of the vocabulary of America’s leaders, reporters and friends immediately. The wrong terms promote the idea that terrorist elements represent legitimate Islamic concepts, which in turn might aid in the enemy recruitment of disenfranchised Muslims because we have identified to them a seemingly “traditional” outlet through which they can voice their dissatisfaction. It is essential to use the right language to

address worldwide problems so that various audiences—which include the American-Muslim community—understand the full scope of the problem and are intellectually able to identify with potential solutions that are reasonable and ethical.

This article offers word choices not just for public officials and correspondents but even students in the classroom and others studying terrorism. In fact, anyone who is interested in current events should have some familiarity with these words as well as the concepts and new dialogue they represent. We must use the right turn of phrase whenever attempting to inform and educate; language is a key component for us to be able to, in a way that makes sense to any audience, ask for assistance or demand action that will help defeat the scourge of Islamic totalitarian terrorism. 



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